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LIVING ENGLISH POETS

BY R. A. SCOTT-JAMES.

A FEW years ago it was the fashion in England to lament the dearth of promising authors, especially poets. But since then English people have assured themselves that they are still, after all, a poetical people. The reproach against the age was taken as a challenge by dozens of young adventurers, who resolved to prove in their own persons that the twentieth century was not without poets. Tiny volumes of verse fluttered forth from the Press. Poetry Societies were started, and Poetry Reviews, and men and women met in a darkened hall to hear Mr. Sturge Moore declaim sonorous verses. Publishers began to advertise new genius, and reviewers began to attend to poetry as if it were really a serious business. The opening pages of *The English Review* were devoted to poems which seemed to be appreciated in proportion to their ever-increasing length. Mr. John Masefield had a success such as had been attained by no poet since Stephen Phillips in his prime. It is true that Mr. W. H. Davies might have starved if he had not received a Government pension; that Mr. Yeats—I believe I am right—never entertained the idea of supporting himself by poetry; that Mr. Doughty has not so much as been heard of by one Englishman in a thousand. Nevertheless, poetry has now become a mentionable subject in decent society; and it is no longer synonymous with Tennyson or even Kipling. It has become a modern thing, lending itself to new experiments, a possible vehicle for new ideas, a means even of becoming notorious on a grand scale.

But before considering some of these younger authors who represent newer phases in poetry I should like to dwell a little upon the work of an elder—one who is not by any means so exquisite a poet as Mr. Robert Bridges, who cannot compare in creative vigor with the greater poets who

were contemporary with him, nor with his junior, Mr. W. B. Yeats—but interesting for purposes of comparison because his poetry, even his quite recent poetry, has in it the ring of a past age, of a poetic ideal to which we are not likely to return in this century. I allude to Mr. Edmund Gosse, whom we all think of as a distinguished student and critic of literature, but it is very seldom that we hear any allusion to his poetical work. “Any one who has the patience to turn over these pages,” he says in the Preface to his *Collected Poems*, “will not need to be told that the voice is not of 1911—it is of 1872, or of a still earlier date—since my technique was determined more than forty years ago, and what it was it has remained.” When first I read these words they sounded strangely to me. It was only the other day that he began to edit a distinguished literary page for a daily paper. Still more recently I heard him speaking on a public platform. His activity does not seem to be a thing of yesterday, and it was he who wrote the most intimate and, perhaps, the most interesting biographical study of recent years; as editor and critic he is still amongst active living writers. In reading his later poems we can see how keen is his desire to retain sensibility to the full, not to become stereotyped by the past, or blind to the newer beauties. He is conscious of the passage of the Time-Spirit and the changed ways of men, and the passionate desire of all vital minds to be fully percipient to the last.

“So, if I pray for length of days,
It is not in the barren pride
That looks behind itself, and says
‘The Past alone is deified!’

“Nay, humbly, shrinkingly, in dread
Of fires too splendid to be borne—
In expectation lest my head
Be from its Orphic shoulders torn—

“I wait, till, down the eastern sky
Muses, like Maenads in a throng,
Sweep my decayed traditions by,
In startling tunes of unknown song.

In the three hundred and fifty pages of the *Collected Poems* there is nothing which were better omitted. Even the mere literary experiments, the rondeaus, the sestinas—the literary jokes in which every poet indulges—are neatly

turned. Mr. Gosse has attempted, and succeeded with, a great variety of meters. His diction is almost unfailingly good; indeed, it is the very regularity and faultlessness of his verse that sometimes jars. It is the work of a man many-sided in his nature. He can find himself in the atmosphere of a Coleridge, a Wordsworth, a Keats, a Rossetti, a Béranger, and often his form insensibly glides into that of the precursor whose spirit he for the moment assimilates. He is by no means a mere imitator. His feeling is his own; but his genius seems to be rather assimilative than strictly creative. Scores of his poems have the beauty and the value of the literature written by the great poets, when they were not in their greatest moods.

And perhaps it is precisely the many-sidedness of Mr. Gosse's tastes and interests which has left him so few decisive poetic successes. He has ranged through literature with a catholic taste. He has helped to create reputations—the reputations, for instance, of Ibsen and Stevenson. There have been many calls upon his literary instinct, and it is not surprising that the most uniformly successful of his poems are those in praise of the great men of letters whom, with his faculty for friendship, he made his friends. In the poems on these men—Ibsen, Ruskin, Stevenson, Henry Sidgwick, Rossetti, and unnamed friends who have departed—there is dignity, fineness, and the pathos of a regret for that which he shared with them, though he lacked the power, or more probably the opportunity, fully to express it.

“But not in vain beneath this lofty shade
I danced awhile, frail plaything of the seas;
Unfit to brave the ampler main with these;
Yet, by the instinct which their souls obeyed,
Less steadfast, o'er the trackless wave I strayed,
And follow still their vanishing trestle-trees.

The beauties of literature, of many kinds and in many languages, the feeling and perception of friendship, nature, and the whole life-process through which men pass to a green memory or to oblivion—these are to be found here, the full-bodied expression of a personality—for poetry is that, or nothing. It is no defect in it that it is of 1872—that there is a certain formality, a kind of austerity, even in its flippancies. It is meditative poetry. It is poetry which is essentially concerned with the emotions, the fancies, or the reflections, the very personal and secluded reflections, of

a mind still concerned about the private ways of the spirit. The emotions, the operations of the mind, and the objective things of life—they are the concern of Mr. Gosse, as they were the concern of Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Morris, and many poets before them. For the most part the men of that age adhered to the traditions of poetry, whether they were romantic or classical. At any rate, on the formal side most of them—Browning is an exception—remained faithful to the accepted types. On the inner side it was an age which was much concerned about its soul, about nature, and about persons—yes, about persons. Whatever we may think about the Victorian age, from its literature at least we should conclude that it was an age when men valued friendships. And so its best poetry was essentially emotional, personal and subjective.

Now, I do not suggest that in the poetry of our younger men there is emerging a single new type with a few distinctive characteristics which can be contrasted with Victorian poetry. On the contrary, if there is anything which we should particularly remark it is the absence of such typical traits, it is the extraordinary diversity of type; men are experimenting with verse, attempting to revive old forms and invent new, to restore the spirit of antiquity or to ride abreast of the practical spirit of the time. Men like Mr. W. B. Yeats and “A. E.” sought to unite the ancient, and, as they believed, essential Irish spirit with the spirit which is manifested throughout the stream of English lyrical poetry. In Mr. Yeats there was more romanticism than he would care to admit, though the Elizabethan ideal which he cherished and his own power of concentration did much to subdue and chasten the insubordinate, vaguely aspiring spirit which in lesser Celtic poets turns to froth, with no undercurrent of human truth to give significance to its flaky beauty. Fiona Macleod is the classic instance of this frothy Celtic spirit which is unstayed by human truth or relevance to life; and there is much of this in contemporary Irish poetry. Mr. Yeats is not wholly free from it, but he was conscious of the evil tendency, and subdued it, and the body of fine poetry which stands to his name, taken as a whole, is unequalled for clarity, feeling, beauty and felicity of expression by any large body of poetry standing to the name of any other living poet.

But the Time-Spirit is active, or fickle perhaps, and Mr.

Yeats has already almost ceased to be a quite modern poet. He, like Mr. Gosse, formed his technique in the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century is casting about with feverish energy for a new technique and new things to express. Mr. William Watson belongs quite as much to the past as does Mr. Gosse, though it might be said of him that he could belong to any age that knew its Milton and its Wordsworth. In him assuredly there was no attempt at inventiveness; he has always repudiated the idea that the poet should seek to innovate. He stands for austerity and discipline in thought, style, and diction, for a fine exactness, which in his case was compatible with the old passion for the idea of "freedom" no less than with that private, self-communing spirit the Victorians loved to express. Such a poet as Mr. Maurice Hewlett, antiquarian as he often is in the subjects he treats, is much more modern in spirit. In style and technique he is one of those who have gone back, as men for four centuries have constantly gone back, to the manner of the ancient Greeks. Just as that clever experimenter in verse, Mr. Ezra Pound, has created something of an effect by repeating the very meters, melodies, and mannerisms of the Provençal troubadours, so Mr. Hewlett, modeling his style upon the far finer Greek originals, produced an effect which was better than Mr. Pound's in proportion as the Greek tragedians are superior to the troubadours. In his execution he has really recaptured much of the manner of the great Greek tragedians. In "The Death of Hippolytus" there is something of the aloofness, the blitheness, the thrust of phrases, the grimness, the sedateness which we associate with Greek drama. If he has little of the passion or fluency of Swinburne, he has some of his phrase-making skill, and he is free from that rhythmical lilt which in Swinburne was often excessive. We shall never be carried away as by the music of "Atalanta in Calydon," but we are often arrested by grim echoes from the actual Greek, apt translations, as they might be, from an existing original.

But though Mr. Hewlett has been clever enough to adapt the technique of Greek poets to his own purpose in poetical drama, nevertheless in his treatment of subject, in thought and feeling, we may see, rather by his defects than by his excellences, how entirely modern he is. In "Minos, King of Crete," the first play in his trilogy "The Agonists,"

we may find ourselves at the outset not a little irritated by his habit of stage-managing with a view to a public that likes sensational and scenic effects. Shakespeare used thunder and lightning at the beginning of "The Tempest," but only a very modern poet could use these devices as an introduction to tragedy. But it is more to the point that his treatment of Pasiphæ is not only one that would have been impossible to the Greeks, but would have been impossible to any literary age which had not been so led away by modern theories of realism as to believe that any sort of monstrosity, being conceived as actual, might be made also an object of sympathetic emotion. Pasiphæ is a creature of monstrous, unnatural lust, so vile, and so inhuman in its vileness, that it is impossible to conceive that human sympathy should be enlisted in her affair, as if it were a normal and humanly pitiable lapse from virtue. No Greek tragedian ever did attempt, or ever would have attempted, to arouse pity for a creature whose grotesque story expressed the Greek abomination for Phœnician barbarism. Nothing but the Philistine, or, in this case, Phœnician realism of the twentieth century, can account for Mr. Hewlett's attempt to elicit fine feeling from an abnormal and nauseous incident.

It has always seemed to me that the transition from the English Victorian age to the experimental age which followed it was marked by the South-African War. For a dozen years before that war there had been restless movements in the very heart of the nation; the men who were to be most conspicuous at the close of the century were leavening the nation or being leavened themselves. Joseph Chamberlain appeared as the embodiment of the transitional spirit in the political arena. In journalism the movement took shape in the person of Alfred Harmsworth. In literature the man of the moment was Rudyard Kipling. Those three fateful embodiments of the Time-Spirit seemed to dominate England and shake her clean out of her *fin-de-siècle* complacency. England could never be the same again, after those three men had been at the helm, for however short a period. The course was deflected; the reckoning lost. Austere, dignified Whigs would appear again in politics, but never again would their austerity and dignity represent our political system. Sonorous, sober, highly judicious journalists might still succeed in producing, at

great loss, a journal expressing themselves and their views, but no considerable section of the nation would ever again hang upon their words. And even in poetry, which lies so much nearer to the roots of human nature, and might therefore be expected to vary less with the fashions of a time, we cannot but perceive that the private, personal utterances of an Arnold, a Tennyson, a Browning, a Rossetti, would have less chance of being heard in the din of to-day, however sweet the expression, however intimately moving to the spirit. There is a poet belonging to the younger generation who has written lyrics of exquisite grace and charm, who can deal half playfully, half seriously, with the lightest of subjects, and make it delicate and entrancing; who can touch the deeper note of the romantic poets and make of it something grim, perplexing, haunting; or can produce in a few stanzas an intimate feeling for persons portrayed in some suggestive aspect. Mr. Walter la Mare is well known to a small circle of literary persons, but neither his poems nor his prose-writings have been widely read as they should have been.

Mr. Rudyard Kipling would perhaps shudder at the thought, but it is evident—and it is to his credit—that he was essentially a democrat. He made his appeal to the average man. His ballads were written about ordinary men and ordinary things; the feelings they portrayed were the feelings of every-day life, feelings which every one without distinction might feel in a vigorous and perhaps boisterous way. Wordsworth never really brought poetry back to the common, every-day life of simple folk. Long ago Coleridge pointed out that this was a popular superstition about Wordsworth shared by the poet himself. But to a far greater extent Mr. Kipling did make his appeal to the common stock of every-day and average emotion—the emotion of the average man. He was not interested, as the great Victorian poets had been, in the lonely way of the spirit; in the more personal emotions; or in nicety of expression. For him it was the corporate spirit that counted—the instinct, not for friendship, but for fellowship. He had sentiment in abundance, but he approached sentiment with that sort of nervous braggadocio with which the school-boy conceals his softer feelings. A clever American critic, Mr. Bliss Perry, alludes to that “commonness of mind and tone” which Mr. Bryce declared to be inevitable among

masses of men associated, as they are in America, under modern democratic government. "This commonness of mind and tone," says Mr. Perry, "is often one of the penalties of fellowship. It may mean a leveling down instead of a leveling up." The loud stridency of Mr. Kipling's voice is perhaps "one of the penalties" which has to be paid for the democratic sentiment of fellowship.

That there should be some "leveling down" is sure to follow when the poet finds himself absorbed in the common emotions of common life, and speaking to the common man. But there need not necessarily be that coarseness of sentiment, that crudity of thought, that bigotry of limited sympathy, miscalled patriotism, which has debased the level of so much of Mr. Kipling's writing. I should say that Mr. G. K. Chesterton owes more than he supposes to the influence, direct or indirect, of Mr. Kipling; that though his opinions, his sympathies, his conclusions are all diametrically opposed to those of the elder writer, still there is something in common between the two which is essentially a democratic quality, the final standard being that of reference to commonness, normal feeling, the common man. Mr. Chesterton wrote a very stirring poem in the "Ballad of King Alfred," a ballad which appealed to patriotism, fellowship, and those broad, profound emotions which underlie the common sense of a people. Mr. Chesterton's ballad was nearer to the spirit of the "Barrack-room Ballads" than he, I am sure, would be willing to admit.

Mr. Kipling did this great thing, if not for literature, at least for men and men of letters. He expressed emotions in language which was as far as possible from the language of æstheticism. This meant, perhaps, that he could not express very subtle or unusual emotions, that his perceptions were broad rather than fine; but he at least taught the world that there were certain profound manly feelings which might be expressed without the preliminary *unmaning* of æstheticism; and his distinction lies in the fact that he uttered them with vehemence and intensity. In Victorian times the average citizen thought of poetry as a somewhat weak-minded, effeminate pursuit—as very often it was. The poet who might be persuaded of the sublimity of his calling had necessarily to steel himself against the abuse of the matter-of-fact persons who have no traffic in poetry; and in so doing he lost the advantage of that bracing though

insufficient criticism by which the sane, practical man influences many of the arts;—that is to say, the readers and upholders of poetry everywhere agreed to put the poet beyond the reach of a criticism from which prose can never be wholly exempt. The matter-of-fact view being put out of court in the judgment of poetry, the poet was encouraged to believe that he was not concerned with the same universe as that of common fact. I have heard literary critics speak of romantic or highly imaginative novels, saying: “It is all delicate fancy and imagination; it is not concerned with realities; it is sheer poetry”—as if poetry were not concerned with realities! I have heard people criticize the prose works of a given writer:—“This is all too musical, and sentimental, and self-centered; this sort of thing cannot be done in prose; it should be done in poetry”—as if nonsense becomes less nonsensical by means of meter or rhyme! This easy-going view of the function of the poetic art has borne an ample harvest of nonsense. I could, were it worth while, name many living bards who consider that any sort of fancy or feeling is good enough for poetry so long as it be prettily or gracefully handled, who would thus degrade poetry to the position of the easiest, as it has for long been the least prized, of the fine arts.

This havoc has been wrought, in part, by what I may call the doctrine of the sensitive soul. Keats is the classic example of the poet who lived and died through sensitiveness. It was a weakness inherent in the romantic movement which, though it had so much that was enchantingly strange and beautiful to give to the world, bequeathed to it also a consciousness of its nerves and a pride in its very defects. When Coleridge had taught his successors to glorify the poetic perception and vision, to give to the secret feelings a new warrant and value, they came to think it boorish to conceal their fine feelings, and they acquired the habit of expressing feelings which the common man scarcely experiences without a sense of shame. The poet came to be essentially the man who felt acutely, and anything that was a “feeling” came to have a sort of value of its own as denoting poetic sensitiveness. Hence the excessive softness, the indefiniteness, the languishing and the effeminacy which since the beginning of the nineteenth century have been tolerated in poetry because poetry was supposed to be the proper vehicle for such weakness. It is

significant that the most admired poem of Keats begins with a sentiment which we should agree to detest in a prose-writing:

"My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk—"

I contend that as this sentiment would be intolerable in prose, so also it is not to be suffered in poetry.

Now the Kipling epoch did introduce a certain hardness, or masculinity, into the cultured life of the country which gave an opportunity for escape from the querulousness and the vagueness which had become poetic habits among English poets and lovers of poetry. I say the "Kipling epoch," for Mr. Kipling himself never had the self-discipline, perhaps had not the sense of form, to achieve much durable poetry, and his very masculinity turned at last into an unmasculine shriek. He marked no more than the transition period. Mr. Chesterton is a part of it. He, too, is lacking in sense of form and diction, and could never have been a considerable poet, though there is in his writings abundant evidence of poetic feeling. What I am concerned to observe is that his ballad poetry, too, is marked by that essentially masculine note which seemed to have died out of English poetry—unless Browning and Morris be taken as exceptions. Mr. Hilaire Belloc comes at the latter end of the transition period. When a man has only written a few poems it is injudicious to say of him that he is a great poet. But at any rate Mr. Belloc has written a few poems which belong to the great order of lyrical verse, and in "The South Country" he surpasses anything that Kipling or Henley achieved, anything perhaps that any English lyrical poet has written this century. If that is not a great poem, then I forswear great poetry, and will be content with the less. There is all Mr. Kipling's sense of fellowship, a thousand times refined, and in alliance with Heaven knows how many of the vital emotions of life, the sense for concrete, simple things, the sense for things remembered, of tragedy expected but not feared, the feeling for men as men, for places as places, for things as things, for the emotions as the serious toys of life, for the ludicrous as the surface aspect of the pathetic—for the whole male side of existence which poetry since Chatterton has been inclined to ignore.

It is quite evident in the very early poetry of Mr. John Masefield that the loudly reverberating ballads of Rudyard Kipling had had their effect upon him; that something of their sheer vehemence and lustiness had mingled with his own feeling for the tropical seas into which he had adventured, with the vivid sense of men and things in strange places which had wrought upon his imagination as years before they had wrought upon Mr. Conrad. Needless to say, Mr. Masefield in most respects stands at the opposite pole of temperament from Mr. Kipling. He is a lyrical poet whose poetry springs not so much from intense interest in the lusty vigor of common life as from an intense feeling for sheer beauty, for that exquisite refinement which may be extracted from life, and it may be mingled with equally intense pain when the beauty is removed. He is, perhaps, nearer akin to the type to which Keats belonged. But certainly the arrival of the spirit represented by Kipling, added to the discipline of his own early adventures, braced him and energized him; and almost his first literary effort took the form of ballad poems uniting a fineness and sweetness which were entirely his own with a kind of lusty vigor which was superimposed. It is easy enough to see the influence of Kipling in the ballad beginning:

“Spanish waters, Spanish waters, you are singing in my ears,
Like a slow sweet piece of music from the grey forgotten years;
Telling tales, and beating tunes, and bringing weary thoughts to me
Of the sandy beach at Muertos, where I would that I could be.”

Those early ballads had the emotional vigor without the characteristic defects of Kipling, and in many cases a charm which was entirely his own. But he very early shook off what there was of that Kipling influence. It was superficial and transitory. Mr. Kipling, as I have said, represented a transition period, and another, an experimental period, has followed. It is probable that Joseph Conrad became a far more potent influence on the imagination of Mr. Masefield than any one other author; though he was assuredly not content to follow any single example, and began steadily to experiment and to strike out his own line. It was unfortunate that the craze for experiment and innovation should, for a time—probably a brief time—have had so strange and uncouth an effect upon so fine and sensitive a genius. Mr. Masefield was—and is—a lyrical poet, fitted

to express the personal emotions which lyrical poetry can support. But he became obsessed with the conviction that poetry ought to be made to do something else than suggest feelings and ideas in a beautiful way; that it ought to serve a social purpose; that it ought to become a direct contributory force to the social morality of the time; that it ought to concern itself with practical modern questions in a practical way; that it ought to present actual life, realistically. The same feeling affected a lesser poet, Mr. Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, who, being a story-teller in verse, and a moralist, has been acclaimed as a powerful poet in both England and America. Mr. Gibson has not yet shown that he is a considerable poet. But Mr. Masfield undoubtedly does possess the poetic talent, perhaps even genius, which Mr. Gibson has not yet sufficiently revealed. Yet the most recent poems of the former have been praised for just the same reasons that Mr. Gibson's have been praised. The New York *Outlook* said of Mr. Gibson: "He is bringing a message which might well rouse his day and generation to an understanding of and a sympathy with life's disinherited—the overworked masses." Mr. Masfield's "The Everlasting Mercy" and his series of realistic poems of the same order have been lavishly eulogized in exactly the same way—and for a similar reason. Each of these poems contains a rousing story; each subserves the purpose of an excellent moral. They are realistic enough, but only in rare passages are they beautiful. "Nothing," said Shelley, "can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse." I have felt that Mr. Masfield's long narrative poems might equally well have been expressed in prose.

I believe this to be more than a passing phase in Mr. Masfield. A poet who could write the charming lyrical poem which by a curious accident was published at the end of "The Everlasting Mercy" in the *English Review* will not long be content to write sensational tracts; we may even be glad that these tracts have been written if they bring the public to attend to the more significant work of so finely gifted an author.

But I am very far from suggesting that the effort made by Mr. Gibson and Mr. Masfield to bring poetry into touch with modern life is without significance. It represented reaction against the querulousness, the vagueness, the mere

prettiness which have so often resulted in nauseous verse. It had its source in the same impulse which led Mr. J. M. Synge to create his finest imaginative effects by means of a severely realistic method. And still earlier Mr. Doughty, who holds a solitary position in modern poetry, had expressed himself in the only way that was natural to him, through an archaic language, the language in which he thought, which lent itself to the hard, vivid and superbly brutal images belonging to his primitive, barbarian, and as it were primeval theme. Mr. Doughty belongs neither to our own nor to any other age, but he has not been without influence upon men of our time. To appreciate "The Dawn in Britain" or "Adam Cast Forth" is to long for the hardness and masculinity which have been rare in English poetry for a hundred years; to feel that what poetry needs is more grit and more brain; and to plead for these is to plead for more poetry, for a stronger imagination.

There is one among the younger poets who has given promise of satisfying these needs, though it remains to be seen whether he may not perhaps be over-weighted on the side of intellect. But in "Mary and the Bramble" and "The Sale of St. Thomas" he has shown us how the poetic imagination ripens into food for adults when virility and intellect have gone to the making of it. There is no mere prettiness in Mr. Abercrombie's writing. The wearisome refrain of sex, disappointed or desirous, neither has part in the argument nor supplies him with images or asides. Innumerable things and events upon the earth appeal to him because of that full-bodied experience which they carry to the wakeful and the zestful, experience which is manifold, which fills all the chinks of memory, which may recall pain, which may be charged with pathos, but is never morbid; beautifully he masses vigorous impressions of sense under a large imaginative idea. Here there is no pale, languishing phantom of beauty, but that which men delight in without the verbal distractions of the aesthete.

In "Mary and the Bramble" he has taken an intellectual idea and treated it allegorically, and essentially poetically. The Virgin Mary in his story symbolizes the "upward-meaning mind," fastened in "substance," yet pure and "seemly to the Lord"; and the bramble which clutches her and seeks to smirch her purity is the folly, the muddiness, the stupid cruelty of the world which mocks at all

vision, at all idealism—it is the mortal trying to drag down the immortal part of man. Mary is the love of beauty, or of God; the bramble is the stupidity and grossness of the practical world.

But Mary, “in her rapt girlhood,” with her “eyes like the rain-shadowed sea,” is not the less sweet because she stands for an idea.

“Through meadows flowering with happiness
Went Mary, feeling not the air that laid
Honors of gentle dew upon her head;
Nor that the sun now loved with golden stare
The marvelous behavior of her hair,
Bending with finer swerve from off her brow
Than water which relents before a prow;
Till in the shrinking darkness many a gleam
Of secret bronze-red lustres answered him.”

And when the Spirit of Life vaunts itself in her,

“Not vain his boast; for seemly to the Lord,
Blue-robed and yellow-kerchieft, Mary went,
There never was to God such worship sent
By any angel in the Heavenly ways,
As this that Life had utter’d for God’s praise,
This girlhood—as the service that Life said
In the beauty and the manners of this maid.
Never the harps of Heaven played such song
As her grave walking through the grasses long.”

I cannot dwell upon the subject of “The Sale of St. Thomas.” The dialogue between Thomas and the Captain gives opportunity for description and metaphor almost Elizabethan in their ferocity, though the reflections of Thomas have a spiritual quality which is entirely modern. We hear

“Of monkeys, those lewd mamnets of mankind.”

And of flies staring

“Out of their little faces of gibbous eyes.”

And there are lines such as

“Men there have been who could so grimly look
That soldiers’ hearts went out like candle flames
Before their eyes, and the blood perisht in them.”

Which might be placed side by side with Marlowe's

"The frowning looks of fiery *Tamburlaine*
That with his terrour and imperious eies,
Commands the hearts of his associates."

And we may contrast these vehement records of things with the more philosophic passages.

"Thou must not therefore stoop thy spirit's sight
To pore only within the candle-gleam
Of conscious wit and reasonable brain;
But search into the sacred darkness lying
Outside thy knowledge of thyself, the vast
Measureless fate, full of the power of stars,
The outer noiseless heavens of thy soul."

We may well think that the immediate future of poetry depends upon men of the stamp of Mr. Abercrombie, men for whom poetry is neither a plaything, nor a sweet-sounding expression of desire or anguish or vague dreams; but a serious attempt to grapple with life through combined experience, thought, and vision. Long ago Meredith urged that if fiction was to go on living, it must give us "brain-stuff" and "foodstuff." But no poet has since arisen to make some similar claim for poetry; to urge that within its proper sphere and in its own appropriate way it should attack the larger life of man with intelligence, with common sense and with virile passion.

Mr. W. H. Davies stands apart from them all. I should not like to try and account in any way for Mr. Davies any more than he could account for a singing-bird by describing the trees among which it lived. His poetry is unlike any other poetry that is written to-day. It is fresh and sweet like a voice from a younger and lustier world. It is charged with no clarion message of prophecy; it is burdened with no exactly formulated philosophy of life. There is no rhetoric in it, no rhodomontade. It is the melody of a man's voice singing for the pleasure of singing, now vehemently, from the sheer delight in things physical and outward, now sadly, as some evanescent object induces melancholy, now in a naively reflective way, as past or future brings memories or expectations. He never reaches quite the exquisite melodies of Herrick, but when he writes of love he is as simple as Herrick, and he is more direct, more heart-whole,

less of the perfect singer, perhaps, but more of the lover. If he writes with wide-eyed wonder at the simpler marvels of life, it is in the manner of Blake in "Songs of Innocence," where outwardness of manner and lyrical simplicity leave an impression of something unearthly in its strangeness. Occasionally in the slight extravagance of his imagery we can see that the influence of the seventeenth-century "metaphysical" poets has not left him unscathed, as when he likens love to the influence of spring opening up navigation.

But it is a sure instinct which has taken him to the simpler lyrical poets and led him to mold his style on theirs. His interests lie in the purely personal affairs of the heart; the simpler emotions may be best expressed in those lyrical forms in which the older English literature is pre-eminent, which eschew the fervid rhythms of the soulful nineteenth century. But he is not merely imitative. Sometimes in the same poem we see him, now conforming to the manner of the traditional love-poet, now revivifying it or bursting through it with images and ideas that are wholly personal to himself.

"She had two eyes as blue as Heaven,
Ten times as warm they shone;
And yet her heart was hard and cold
As any shell or stone.

"Her mouth was like a soft red rose
When Phœbus drinks its dew;
But oh, that cruel thorn inside
Pierced many a fond heart true.

"She had a step that walked unheard,
It made the stones like grass;
Yet that light step has crushed a heart,
As light as that step was.

"Those glowing eyes, those smiling lips,
I have lived now to prove
Were not for me, were not for me,
But came of her self-love.

"Yet, like a cow for acorns that
Have made it suffer pain,
So though her charms are poisonous,
I moan for them again."

In any other poet the cow and the acorns would be an

intolerable extravagance; but not so from Mr. Davies, who knows and loves all beasts of the field; who knows what it is to tramp over stones and to tramp the grass, so that his "stones like grass" rings freshly, while the dew-drinking Phœbus is stale.

But if he seems to belong to an older tradition, and to have little in common with the self-conscious modern poet, that is only because his life has kept him away from the fashions and fashionable ideas which are the intellectual superficialities of our time, which distinguish the culture of one age from the culture of another. He loves with the strength of intimate friendship the unchanging things in the natural world, the sea, things that grow, and animals and birds. And he is acquainted with the other unchanging things—love, the desire for food, hatred of death, friendship. He is also too keen in his sympathies and interests not to be modern in the sense, for instance, that the romantic appeal has had its effect on him, or that the ugly facts of modern life have stirred and pained him. There is a great variety of emotions registered in his poems. There is the grim ballad called "Treasures." There is a bold union of magical romanticism and sensuous passion in the poem beginning:

"I met her in the leafy woods,
Early a summer's night;
I saw her white teeth in the dark,
There was no better light."

There is a remarkable confidence and elation in the little poem, "The Elements," wherein he identifies himself with nature—it could only be quoted entire. And he records his impression of a tram-car which sweeps along Westminster in the twilight carrying its load of sleeping men from work. He can also write in a vein wholly unlike that of his simple and more characteristic lyrical verses. Thus he describes his childish impressions of a mariner "no good in port or out," as his granddad said:

"And all his flesh was pricked with Indian ink,
His body marked as rare and delicate
As dead men struck by lightning under trees,
And pictured with fine twigs and curled ferns;
Chains on his neck and anchors on his arms;
Rings on his fingers, bracelets on his wrist;
And on his breast the *Jane of Appledore*

Was schooner-rigged, and in full sail at sea.
He could not whisper with his strong hoarse voice,
No more than could a horse creep quietly;
He laughed to scorn the men that muffled close
For fear of wind, till all their neck was hid,
Like Indian corn wrapped up in long green leaves;
He knew no flowers but seaweeds brown and green,
He knew no birds but those that followed ships.
Full well he knew the water-world; he heard
A grander music there than we on land."

All of it is the intensely personal and direct poetry of a man of many moods, many sympathies, but happily removed from the cramping effects of current fashions of thoughts, and talk about thought. He has lived in the open air and among simple people, but always companioned by the poets. And so we have in him a singer fresh and unspoiled, writing from impulse, probably with little conscious technique, about things which he knows and the immediate experiences of life.

R. A. SCOTT-JAMES.